

French's Acting Edition No. 1866

THE MASK

A Play in One Act

Adapted from a Story by F. Tennyson Jesse

by

H. M. HARWOOD and

F. TENNYSON JESSE

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CHARACTERS

JAMES GLASSON

VASHTI GLASSON

WILLIE STRICK

The Play is arranged so that, if necessary, the parts of JAMES GLASSON and WILLIE STRICK—so far as their speaking parts are concerned—can be taken by the same actor.

The Scene is laid in Cornwall, in the present day.

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THE MASK

SCENE: *The kitchen of JAMES GLASSON'S house in the Cornish village of Perran-au-Zenna. On the right is the fire-place with kitchen-range, and against the wall above the fire-place an oak dresser with shelves above it containing crockery of various kinds. At the back the door—about in the centre—opens directly to the outer air. To the right of the door stands an old chest of drawers. To the left of the door and extending along the whole remaining length of the back wall is a long low window with casement curtains drawn back. Outside the window, framing the sill, are flowers in pots. On the left of the room is a short flight of stairs leading up to a door which opens into a bedroom. Through the window can be seen the rolling expanse of moorland, the grey monotony of which is roughly broken by the sharp outlines of a stone tower, one side of which is broken through at the base, leaving a yawning hole. This is the top of a disused mine shaft. It stands some thirty yards from the window and casts its long shadow towards the house.*

It is past sunset and the moon is just rising. Seated in an armchair by the table is a man whose face from the hair downwards is entirely covered by a straight black mask. There is a hole for the right eye and another for the mouth, otherwise the straight black line is unbroken. He sits with bowed shoulders, his arms gripping the arms of the chair; occasionally he fills a spoon from the dish before him and, just raising the lower corner of the mask, tilts the contents into his mouth. With her back to the table a woman fills from a teapot a cup with a long spout, and places it on the table by the man. She is a fierce-eyed black-haired woman. Carelessly—even untidily dressed—a splendid slattern.

VASHTI. Don't 'ee burn yourself. 'Tes brave and hot. (*She brings bundle from pantry and places it on table. He drinks slowly.*) 'Tes nigh pon time 'ee was startin', James.

JAMES. I'll be there soon enough.

VASHTI. Do 'ee go while there's the last o' the daylight. The moon's but foxy light for 'ee now 'ee don't see as 'ee did.

(*She goes up to the chest of drawers and lights the lamp.*)

JAMES. I can see well enough—though I have but one eye. Better'n some chaps wi' two, maybe. (*Half to himself.*) Simme I see more than I did wi' two myself.

VASHTI. You do get about wonnerful—and that's truth. (*Glancing at clock.*) Shall 'ee be long over to Truro, James?

James. Happen I may. It'll depend.

VASHTI. On doctor?

JAMES. Iss.

VASHTI. He'm rare and clever, they do say.

JAMES (*grimly*). He'll need to be. (*He turns towards her.*) Think he'll give I a new face, do 'ee, Vassie? (*He puts his hand up to the mask.*) Take a look at et before I go. (*He goes close to her.*) Happen ye'll never have the chance again.

VASHTI (*recoiling*). Don't 'ee! Oh, don't 'ee.

JAMES. Feared to look on your own husband? Eh! My life but 'twas bad luck on you, Vassie, my accident, you that ever had eye for a comely chap.

VASHTI. No more'n they had for me. An' ef I had—you were glad enought of et—wance.

JAMES. Um! I was a fitty chap those days—'twas what you took me for—that.

VASHTI (*in an impenetrable tone*). Was et?

JAMES. What else?

VASHTI (*in the same tone*). P'raps 'twas you took me.

JAMES (*nodding his head slowly*). Iss—I wanted 'ee—

and I got 'ee—spite o' William Strick.

VASHTI (*startled*). Willie! What's it to do with he?

JAMES (*grimly*). 'Ansome Cousin Willie. (*Eyeing her keenly*.) You an' he were night swettards wance—I reckon.

VASHTI (*quickly*). An'—if we were? (*Turns away to fire*.) He didn't get me. So lave un be.

JAMES (*slowly*). Iss. Lave un be.

VASHTI (*crossing to window-seat*). You'm got the uglies this evenin', I should say. Think of the Doctor over to Truro—what he'll do for 'ee.

JAMES. He can't make me fit for work.

VASHTI (*rather impatiently*). Work! Simme that's all you think on. (*Takes up work-basket, and begins darning a sock*.)

JAMES. An' what better? (*He sits down again and inserting the long spout of the feeding-cup through the hole of the mask, he drinks*.)

VASHTI. Iss. I do believe you think that. Sometimes, James Glasson, I wonder for what you wanted to take a wife. 'Twas to your work you were wed. You always thought first on that.

JAMES. Work! Yes—I did care on that. Findin' out the secrets of the earth—forcin' out her treasure—her silver an' tin. (*To himself*.) My soul! But I was findin' a way that night. (*He is lost in thought*.)

VASHTI. The night of your accident? (*She goes and sits by the fire, watching him*.)

JAMES (*nodding*). Iss. (*Raising his voice*.) When I think of how I was goin' to see manager—an' they chaps from London town—an' show 'em how I was findin' out the way to get silver cheap! What! There'd have been work made for men ef I could ha' gone on. . . . All these dumb an' blind mines come to life agen. . . . (*He speaks as one seeing visions, then breaks off suddenly, and buries his face in his hands on the table, then raises it again*.) But 'tes auver—'tes all auver—now. (*He rises and goes towards her, changing his tone to one of hideous, sardonic pleasantry*.) Well—now I can give all my time to my lovin' wife. No more work. All

billin' and cooin'. 'T'es somethin', ef I do have to wear a mask, to know that I've the finest maid in all Carn-wall for my own—(*with grim satisfaction*) my own. (*He puts his black face over her shoulder.*) Shall us be swettards agen, Vassie? (*As she shrinks away.*) No? An' yet they do say you'm the best wife a man ever had—the way you nursed me. Iss—I've heard how 'ee set by me come night an' day—while my soul hung on my breath—me lying there on the bed like a dead log what they do call. (*Looking straight at her.*) Ef 'ee'd so much as laid a hand auver my mouth—what then, Vassie? Dead men tell no one. Did you ever think on that, Vassie?

VASHTI (*her nerves are strained beyond endurance, she springs up and begins noisily collecting the plates off the table and taking them to the pantry*). 'T'es time you was startin', James.

JAMES (*looking at the clock*). That's a true sayen'—so—I'll be gwain to wance. (*He picks up his cap off the top of the drawers, and also a muffler, a dark one, which he wraps round his throat.*) An' you—shall you be gwain bed soon?

VASHTI. Iss—why should I be stayin' up?

JAMES. You'm not feared?

VASHTI. What on?

JAMES (*sardonically*). Bein' alone. A tender maid like you. You've never yet been here alone the night.

VASHTI. Have a care going by shaft, James. That great hole in the side be crumbled away near to the path. 'T'es not too safe, I'm thinken!

JAMES. Oh, I'll keep clear o' shafts right enough. 'T'es a long way down en—an' no gotten up again ance down—an' no one to know where you be, neither. There's many a chap lyen' at bottom of a shaft now ef truth were told. Chaps that came home marketmerry—an' chaps that were sick of their life—an' (*with a grim laugh*) a few, maybe, as other folk wanted out of the way. (*He goes through the door.*) Good-bye.

VASHTI (*running after him to the door*). You'll lave me know when you'll be back?

JAMES (*from the darkness*). I'll lave 'ee know.

(VASHTI closes the door. For a moment her head drops and her whole figure is full of lassitude. But only for a moment—then she raises her head and stretches herself with the relief of one suddenly set free. She takes a deep breath and passes her hand across her eyes as if to sweep away her thoughts of a moment before. Leaning against the door, she surveys the room for a moment and then begins to move about swiftly but quietly—a happy smile on her lips—singing to herself gently. She gets a clean cloth for the table, on which she sets fresh plates, knives, forks and glasses. From the pantry, she produces a pie—a triumphant creation which she eyes proudly—and a jug of water. Then, from a drawer, a bottle of whiskey. Finally, going to the window-seat, she takes out a parcel—and reveals a black silk dress, which she spreads out on the floor, fingering it with loving care and pride. Suddenly she gathers up the dress in her arms, and with a little laugh of joy and anticipation goes quickly up the stairs to the bedroom. The shadow of a man is seen crossing the window space, then the door opens slowly and WILLIE STRICK comes in. He is a man of similar build and height to GLASSON, but lighter and more youthful in his movements. His hair is the same colour as GLASSON'S—black. He is dressed in a blue reefer suit, with a white scarf round his neck. He is obviously nervous and moves cautiously about for a few moments before calling in a low whisper.

WILLIE. Vassie! (*Comes further in, and calls again.*)
Vassie!

VASHTI (*coming out quickly from bedroom on the top stair. She has taken off her dress and is in her petticoat—the silk dress in her hand.*) What's that?

WILLIE. 'T'es me! Willie!

VASHTI. Aw—you did fright me some. I thought 'twas James come back. You'me early. How could 'ee

be so mad ? He's awnly this few minutes gone.

WILLIE (*more confidently, approaching the stairs*). 'T'es all right. I crouched behind hedge an' saw him gwain down along. I've watched this half hour gone. (*He lays his hand on hers on the rail.*) Come down.

VASHTI (*shakes her head*). Not yet. I've something new for 'ee to see.

WILLIE. I don't want to see nawthen—only you. Come down. . . . I'm waiting on you. . . .

(*She laughs again, shakes her head and disappears into the room. He moves about the room examining the things, finally getting to the fire-place. He takes off his cap. Looks in the glass at the fire-place. Then he takes up the whiskey, and replaces it. VASHTI reappears clad in the silk dress.*)

VASHTI. Here I be, Willie!

WILLIE (*foolishly agape*). Why, what's come to 'ee, Vassie ?

VASHTI. 'T'es a weddin' gown made for you. (*She comes down the stairs.*)

WILLIE. But 'tes black, Vassie. 'T'es ill-luck on a black bridal.

VASHTI. Ours is no white bridal, lad.

(*WILLIE goes to her—she pushes him back.*)

Wait, I'll draw the curtains—(*does so*) set you down.

(*He sits down at the table and grabs her arm as she takes up the whiskey. He takes hold of bottle, and they laugh. Then she pours the whiskey out and sits down at the table.*)

WILLIE. When'll he be back ?

VASHTI. Tomorrow—or maybe, next day. He'm stayin' the night over to Truro.

WILLIE. How do he seem ?

VASHTI. Strange-like. (*Suddenly.*) Willie—Willie—

I shall go mad wi' et. 'Tis the mask that kills me. To live wi' et night an' day—night an' day.

WILLIE. Happen if you were to look just wance—just to see what's behind—'twould frighten you less, Vassie.

VASHTI. I haven't the strength for et—and that's the truth. One night, when he was sleepin' I put out my hand to look, and my heart died away in my breast. Yet simme, sometimes, that nawthen could be worse nor that mask. One day, Willie, I saw en when he was worken' there in the garden. And he stood up and faced the wind—and the mask all blew in—right in from his brow to his chin it blew—and there seemed nawthen there—only a great hollow. (*Shudders.*) I wake up still wi' cold sweat on me—dreaming of et. . . . And 'tes for always—for always. (*Her hands on his arm.*)

WILLIE (*putting down his glass, and taking hold of her arms*). Not for you, I swear et.

VASHTI. 'Tesen't even as if I could be sorry for en. He'm too hard to pity. 'Tes just fear I feel. Sometimes when he'm close to me the minutes hold their breath for fear. (*Fiercely.*) And it makes me hate him. He'd made me hard before—thinking of nawthen but his work. And now I *hate* him.

WILLIE (*with sudden coldness*). How did 'ee make 'ee take en, Vassie? Tell me that.

VASHTI. They do say *that's* what no woman ever tells. (*Rising.*)

WILLIE (*pushes chair back, still sitting—jealous*). You knew I wanted 'ee.

VASHTI. You never said so.

WILLIE. I was only waiten'.

VASHTI (*bitterly*). Waiten'! And while you waited—he took me. (*She goes to the window.*) 'Twas just out there, by the shaft. Simme, sometimes, that shaft's like a great live thing that rules me and mine—a thing that's always waitin'—waitin'.

WILLIE. How did et happen?

VASHTI. I was fetchin' the cows home, and he was

comin' from the mine. I looked up and saw en against the sky-line—I couldn't tell ef 'twere he or you.

WILLIE (*tensely*). Yes?

VASHTI (*in a sudden revulsion she comes close to him and sits on the edge of the table*). Willie, why do 'ee make me tell 'ee?

WILLIE (*harshly*). Go on——

VASHTI. When he came up I saw 'twas he. He said nawthen—just gripped me by the arms and swung me against the side o' the shaft. Ef I shut my eyes I can feel now how rough and cold the stone of er was.

WILLIE. And then?

VASHTI. "Which is et to be?" he says, "him or me?" And I was all whisht like. I'd no mouth spache left in me. "You won't tell?" he says, "Then I'll do the tellin'."

WILLIE. What did 'a say!

VASHTI. No—that's what I can't tell. Not to spite the one of you nor plague the other.

(There is a moment's pause. Then WILLIE flings away from her and goes sulkily to the fire-place.)

Yet it was nawthen—just bare words. (*Low.*) And I knew I was his—to do as he liked with.

WILLIE. You loved en, then.

VASHTI. Love? Dear Heaven knows what 'tes. I might have—ef he'd wanted et. For he was rare an' like you, Willie.

WILLIE (*comes nearer to Vassie*). Wanted et? Wasn't he mad for 'ee?

VASHTI. Iss—till he got me. Just to have me his—that was all he cared. After that, he took no more trouble wi' me. I was his, but he was never mine.

WILLIE (*catching her in his arms*). Well, he's had his chance, damn him! Now it's my turn. Day and night—over there in America, I'd be thinkin' of you, Vassie. Thinkin' by day and dreamin' by night. Dreamin' that I held you in my arms—close—like this. Something was always pluckin' at my heart—callin'

me back—to you. (*Kneels.*)

VASHTI (*putting her hand on his head and looking at him, her voice thrilling with the triumph of possession*). Yes, you'm mine. All mine—mine to the last thought of you.

WILLIE. That's the truth—(*drawing his hands down her arms*) you'm witched me, Vassie. (*After a pause.*) You mind the day we met—after I come back ?

VASHTI. The day of the accident ? Shall I ever forget it.

WILLIE. We walked up auver the moors together, for I was puttin' you home, and when we heard the noise of the explosion—like the heavens burstin', I thought 'twas a thunderbolt come to strike us in the midst of sin.

VASHTI. Sin ? How'd we sinned ?

WILLIE (*turning from her and speaking with a touch of Methodism*). There was sin in my heart towards you that day.

VASHTI. And now ?

WILLIE. Now I don't care. (*Rising and seizing her in his arms.*) I don't know whether 'tes sin or not. I only know 'tes hell to be away from you—and heaven to have you here in my arms—close. That's what love is, Vassie.

VASHTI (*clinging to him*). Oh, I want to be loved, Willie, I want you to want me.

WILLIE. Is that what you love me for, Vassie ? (*He moves a little away from her.*)

VASHTI. Iss. (*Quickly.*) Oh, but that's not all. For that—and—other things.

WILLIE. What things ?

VASHTI (*slowly*). For your look—and the way you walk—and the straight body of you. For your woman's eyes . . . and your man's mouth. Ah!

WILLIE (*he has caught her in his arms and is closing her mouth with his*). Ah! (*She struggles to release herself.*)

VASHTI. Wait !

(He lets her go, and she goes to the lamp, which she puts out, leaving the room lit only by the moonlight filtering through the white casement curtains. As she returns, in passing the fender, she touches with her dress the poker which clatters to the hearth. They both start guiltily. The woman recovers herself first.)

VASHTI. Us be plum foolish. Do believe us both thought 'twas James come back. And him over to Truro. Be you afeared, Willie ?

WILLIE. Afeared ? On what ?

VASHTI. On James. There's times when I think he knows.

WILLIE *(with returning courage)*. Knows! Let him know. He's had his turn. You'm my woman now. Not James Glasson's, not any man's—but just mine. Come ?

(He takes her hand and draws her across the room to the stairs. She stands on the bottom step, she facing, he with his back to the door—he still has hold of her hands.)

WILLIE. How I've waited for this. . . . *I've waited*

(The door slowly opens, letting in a shaft of moonlight, which creeps across the floor till it attracts the woman's glance. Her eyes follow it to the door, and she watches in fascinated silence first the hand that creeps round the door, then the mask appearing above it. Not till GLASSON is in the room does she rouse herself.)

VASHTI *(screaming)*. Willie! Take care—for your life!

(As she speaks, GLASSON springs across the room and catches WILLIE as he turns. The men grip each other and stagger across the room. They struggle in the space between the table and the fire—a plate is

knocked off the table, and the armchair pushed up to the corner. There is a heavy fall, and both men are seen lying in the shadow by the fire. Gradually, one of them detaches himself from the heap and rises to his knees. Nothing is heard but the sound of his laboured breathing.)

WILLIE. Come here!

(She comes to him.)

Love, I'm feared. He's lyen so still.

(She goes across to GLASSON and touches him, then suddenly draws her hand back.)

VASHTI. There's blood on my hand!

WILLIE *(kneeling by GLASSON)*. 'Tis his head. He hit it against the fender.

(VASHTI bends down and opens GLASSON'S shirt. She feels for his heart, then listens for his breathing. She rises to her knees and looks across the body at WILLIE.)

WILLIE. Vassie! He's not——

VASHTI. I do think et.

WILLIE *(wildly)*. But I never meant et. I never touched him. He just hit his head as he fell. On my soul I never meant it. They'll make me swing for this.

(The woman, nerved by the need of action, looks with slow contempt at the frightened man. WILLIE gets slowly to his feet.)

Well, I'd better go for doctor, I reckon.

VASHTI *(harshly)*. No! Us want no doctor here. Wait! Wait! Let me think what's best to be done. *(She looks suddenly up at him.)* Willie! The mask!

WILLIE. The mask ?

VASHTI (*rapidly coming close to him*). Listen. You and he was always the dabs o' each other—your voices, your hair, your walk—everything exceptin' your faces—and his be always covered now. You must be he, Willie.

WILLIE. I ?

VASHTI (*nodding*). Yes.

WILLIE. I daren't. Folks 'ud guess.

VASHTI (*both left of table*). Why would they guess ? He never has speech with a soul—since his trouble.

WILLIE. But, Vassie—what'll they think about me—where'll I be ?

VASHTI. Where but in America, where you've always boasted you'd be goin' back to on the quiet.

WILLIE. But I can't wear a mask all my life!

VASHTI. *All your life!* It's not for all your life. We'll be off to America ourselves as soon as may be. I'll say I'm taking you there because I can get better work there—and for the clever doctors and—oh, it's easy, Willie. (*Coming to him, L.*)

WILLIE (*weakly*). I daren't do it.

VASHTI (*furiously, moving from him, up C.*). Have 'ee anything better to say, then ? Or would 'ee rather go up the line to the Assizes to Bodmin ? (*He looks at her.*) It's one or t'other, Willie!

WILLIE. I'll do it. (*Suddenly.*) But, Vassie, what'll us do with he ? You haven' thought of that.

VASHTI. Iss, I have!

(*She walks to the window and pulls aside the curtains. The gaunt shadow of the shaft stands up in the moonlight, backed by scudding clouds. WILLIE follows her to the window and looks out. Their white faces look at each other across the window space.*)

WILLIE. The shaft ?

(*She nods. He collapses with a groan on a chair by the window, hiding his face in his hands.*)

VASHTI. Come, best get done before the moon's high—'tes nigh full tonight—you'd best put on t' mask.

(She goes to GLASSON'S body.)

WILLIE (*quickly*). No, not that one, I daren't. I couldn't put en against me.

VASHTI. Then I'll cut you one out of my gown.

(She moves to the stairs, turns at the bottom and speaks.)

Put him over by the door.

(She goes up the stairs and into the bedroom. Left alone, WILLIE looks towards the body as if to move it, but cannot nerve himself to the task, and sits finally in a chair, his back to GLASSON, his elbows on the table, supporting his head. Then, for the first time, GLASSON is seen to move, very slowly. His one eye, glittering through the mask, roves round the room, lighting finally on a knife lying on the floor. Slowly and carefully, his hand creeps towards it and with the knife in one hand, he drags himself along the floor to behind WILLIE'S chair. Rising suddenly, he drives the knife in between WILLIE'S shoulders, putting one hand over his mouth at the same time. WILLIE springs forward and to his feet, tries to turn, but collapses in a heap on the floor between table and chest of drawers.)

VASHTI (*hearing the noise*). Willie!

(JAMES hesitates for a moment then, standing up by the door, he slowly puts down the knife on the chest of drawers.)

VASHTI (*opening the bedroom door*). Here's the mask. Catch!

(Her bare arm comes out of the doorway, and the mask flutters down. Then she shuts the door again and JAMES crosses the room and picks up the mask and holds it in his hand. Then suddenly he crosses the room, swiftly ties the mask on to WILLIE'S face, puts his own dark muffler round the dead man's neck and himself puts on WILLIE'S white muffler. Then he drags the body through the door, into the darkness outside, as VASHTI comes down the stairs.)

VASHTI. Are 'ee there ?

JAMES (*outside*). Iss.

(She goes out, and the two of them are seen through the window dragging the body to the shaft. The body is thrust through the hole in the side of the shaft, and then they return. She enters first. He follows, bolting the door. As she goes over to the lamp to light it, he follows and catches hold of her.)

VASHTI (*as the mask brushes her face*). Willie!

JAMES. Not so much as a kiss ? And me wi' red hands because of 'ee!

VASHTI. Do 'ee take off the mask, Willie, now we'm alone. It frights me.

JAMES. I'll take en off soon, to please you, lass. You'd better get to the bed now.

VASHTI. But, Willie——

JAMES. Go!

(She hesitates, looks at him almost in fear, then crosses to the stairs and goes slowly up them. Though she thinks the man is WILLIE, yet unconsciously her attitude towards him is one of fear. This man is her master, the other was her slave. When the bedroom door closes on her, the man takes up the knife and feels it. Still holding it, he looks across to the bedroom, then slowly goes toward the stairs. But he checks himself and stands thinking, balancing the knife in his hand. Then he quietly lays the knife on the

table, and behind the black mask you can almost feel the grin on the twisted mouth, as he goes up the stairs and gently opens the bedroom door, slowly raising the lower edge of the mask. As he enters the bedroom he drags off the mask, throwing it behind him so that it flutters out on to the head of the stairs. There is a moment's silence, and then a wild scream of terror, rising in intensity till the bedroom door snaps to, muffling the sound of a long moan as—

the CURTAIN falls.

